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TEXT OF PRESIDENT REAGAN'S NEWS CONFERENCE

Good evening. I have an opening statement. Earlier today, on his return from Geneva, Secretary [of State George P.] Shultz reported to me on the full details of his discussions with Soviet Foreign Minister [Andrei A.] Gromyko over this past Jan. 7 and 8..

As you are aware, his meeting with Mr. Gromyko has resulted in agreement between our two nations to begin new negotiations on nuclear and space arms. Our objective in these talks will be the reduction of nuclear arms and the strengthening of strategic stability. Our ultimate goal, of course, is the complete elimination of nuclear weapons.

I want to take this opportunity to congratulate George Shultz, Bud [national security affairs adviser Robert C.] McFarlane and the rest of our delegation for a job well done. Their teamwork in Geneva was American diplomacy at its best.

Our differences with the Soviets are many and profound, and these new negotiations will be difficult as we grapple with the issues so central to peace and security for ourselves, our allies and the world. But we will persevere.

And while we must continue to resist actions by the Soviet Union that threaten our freedom and vital interests, or those of other nations, we must also be prepared to work together wherever possible to strengthen the peace.

When I spoke before the United Nations General Assembly this past September, I set out my objectives and proposals for a more stable and constructive relationship between East and West.

Today, it's my hope that this week's meeting in Geneva, while only a single step, is the beginning of a new dialogue between the United States and the Soviet Union. It's also my hope that, as 1985 unfolds, this year will emerge as one of dialogue and negotiations, a year that leads to better relations between the United States and the Soviet Union.

I believe a more stable peace is achievable through these negotiations, and I urge all Americans to join us in supporting this search for a more stable peace. But it takes two sides to have constructive negotiations. One side alone cannot do it.

We've made clear our intentions and expectations for progress in U.S.-Soviet relations. Secretary Shultz has reinforced that message in his lengthy sessions with Mr. Gromyko.

For our part, we'll be flexible, patient and determined. And we now look to the Soviet Union to help give new life and positive results to that process of dialogue.

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Arms-Treaty Verification

In the past, you have characterized the Soviet Union as an evil empire. And you have said that they have repeatedly violated the arms agreements that they have made with the United States. Some of your advisers today doubt that the technology exists to adequately verify any agreement. Do you believe verification is possible, or do you think the Soviets will try to violate any agreement you might make?

Well, we know that they have had a past record of violating agreements. We know also that absolute verification is impossible but verification to the extent possible is going to be a very necessary feature in our negotiations. And I would like to also point out that because they themselves have expressed a desire to totally eliminate nuclear weapons, zero nuclear weapons is far easier to verify than if you are simply reducing the numbers. To have to continue trying to have to count numbers is much more difficult.

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Aid to Nicaraguan Rebels

The time is drawing near when you will have to certify to Congress whether there is a need to continue supplying aid to the rebel forces inside Nicaragua. And I'd like to ask if you intend to press on with this program when that date comes, or do you see any reason, or any developments that have occurred that would permit the United States to drop this covert aid program?

As you know, I shouldn't be talking about anything that is supposed to be covert. But I will say this, that our plans, we have no plans for abandoning the overall ideas of help, such as were created by the Kissinger commission down there—program proposed for over about the next five years—to help those nations to try and become democracies to be democracies and to support the people of Nicaragua, who, I have to point out, are governed by a group that took over by force, ousted others who had been fighting for a revolution. And I think that—and they are supporting the guerrillas that are trying to overthrow the duly elected government of El Salvador. And, no, we're not retreating from what we feel are obligations there in Central America at all.

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